THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

How to Respond to an Angel

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Many people in our Western world have known Christianity only from the outside or have been brought up in churches that teach Christianity as a dull set of prohibitions and restraints. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Christian story is a wild, fascinating story of the Divine entering our constricted and difficult human lives. One may challenge the Christian story as untrue, but it is anything but dull or boring.

Morton Kelsey
The Drama of Christmas
"Angel"

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HOW TO RESPOND TO AN ANGEL

Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 1:26-38

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Luke 1:38 (NRSV)

It began when she was visited by an angel. Two thousand years later we are still utterly captivated by the notion. Every year at about this time, we take leave of our senses, our rational world view, our controlled reason, and open our hearts to angels. We buy books about them, watch television shows, wear pins, decorate our homes with them. Fifty-two Sundays a year we sit in this sanctuary beneath a musical ensemble of angels who are silently praising God with timbrel, trumpet and cymbal over our heads. The true beginning of the story is the occasion when Mary of Nazareth, an adolescent girl, is visited by an angel.

It is one of the most extraordinary encounters in all of literature and one of the most beautiful: The Annunciation, Mary's meeting with an angel. Luke's description is sublime poetry:

> "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. You will bear a son."

As is Mary's response:

> "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

It has inspired some of the world's most elegant poetry and painting. T.S. Eliot wrote about her. So did Dante, W. H. Auden, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and a modern Presbyterian poet, Ann Weems, in her book, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*:

Mary, Nazareth Girl

Mary,
Nazareth girl:
What did you know of ethereal beings
with messages from God?
What did you know of men
when you found yourself with child?
What did you know of babies,
you, barely out of childhood yourself?
God-chosen Girl:
What did you know of God
that brought you to this stable
blessed among women?
Could it be that you had been ready
waiting

listening
for the footsteps
of an angel?
Could it be there are messages for us
if we have the faith to listen?

I love Frederick Buechner's description of the moment:

"She struck the Angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message and he gave it.

"He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now, on the answer of a girl." [*Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who*, p. 39]

It is the most frequently painted scene and one of the most important paintings is by Fra Angelico, in the monastery of San Marcos in Florence. I've known the painting by description and reproduction. In fact, I keep a post card of it in my Bible. And then a few years ago I was privileged to see it. It's a fresco, much larger than I imagined, at the head of a stairway where the monks would see it on their way to their small cells for the night – and personal prayers.

I stood for a long time looking. It is done in soft pastels, the two figures leaning toward each other as if they are both surprised to be there and are listening particularly intently: Mary, for what the angel will say; the angel, for how Mary will respond. It reminded me of Buechner's description. And it also reminded me of something Thomas Moore wrote in *Care of the Soul*,

"Belief can be fixed or unchanging, but faith is almost always a response to the presence of an angel." [p. 255]

She was on the cover of *Newsweek* last August, "the dominant female figure in Western culture." The article described Mary's remarkable presence not only in the gospel narrative, but in our history for 2,000 years and the even more remarkable phenomenon of what is currently happening to her in the Roman Catholic Church. The *Newsweek* article was prompted by a growing movement in the Catholic Church that wants the Pope to proclaim that Mary is a Co-Redeemer along with her son. The exact new title proposed for her would be "Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of all Graces and Advocate for the People of God."

There are three new doctrines under consideration: Mary participates in the redemption achieved by her son; Mary's intercession is necessary to access the grace of Jesus Christ; and all prayers and petitions must go through her. That prompted my friend, Sheila

Gustafson, to observe that it appears like Mary will become Jesus' Administrative Assistant.

The Vatican has received 4.3 million signatures on petitions supporting the proposed new dogma, including bishops and cardinals. Nothing like it has ever been seen in Rome.

It's not exactly our business, but the Protestant and ecumenical communities take a predictably dim view of the matter. If Mary is Co-Redeemer, it appears to Protestants, *Newsweek* observed, that the Holy Trinity becomes the Holy Quartet.

It is a remarkable phenomenon. There have been 400 apparitions of the Blessed Virgin in this century, more than the previous 300 years together. Keeping track of them is a cottage industry with hundreds of newsletters. The Virgin Mary has her own web site.

And there is new serious academic and theological attention to Mary and the role she plays in the life of faith. Feminist theologians see her as a free woman who says "yes" to God. Liberation theologians see in her God's "preferential option for the poor." And historians know that Mary has always represented a compassionate, accessible dimension of Christian faith which the institutional church has historically missed. Millions of people have been devoted to Mary precisely because she is feminine, accepting, merciful, in contrast to the judging, condemning, masculine God the church has frequently portrayed.

Sheila Gustafson, thoughtful and articulate pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe, thinks it has to do with the human longing for wholeness and balance. In a particularly penetrating analysis, she writes:

> "In a tradition which rules out any female participation in the orders of priesthood, where those who vote on such things go home at night to no wives or daughters, it is not surprising that the hunger for balance should focus on a mother – after all, everyone has a mother. It is not only the poor and marginalized who long for the maternal face of the church, but apparently countless Catholic priests, five hundred bishops, forty-five cardinals, and it is rumored, the Holy Father himself." [*The Wholeness of God*, a sermon, 9-29-97]

Mary's journey down through history is remarkable. A church council in Ephesus in 431 gave her the title, "Mother of God." In the 19th century, a time that would produce the seeds of communism and fascism, Pope Pious IX declared the doctrine of Immaculate Conception. And in 1950, Pious XII tried out the idea of papal infallibility for the first time by declaring the dogma of the Assumption: Mary was taken physically into heaven.

Her real story is even more dramatic. Morton Kelsey reminds us that in spite of the idealizing and romanticizing which art has contributed, hers is a difficult story followed by a difficult life. Kelsey points out that many of the medieval paintings of the nativity include a small crucifix fastened to one of the beams in the stable, a "disconcerting

reminder of what will happen to her son and to her." The Art Institute's exhibit of medieval paintings is dominated by pictures of both the Annunciation and the Crucifixion.

Art and poetry may romanticize it but Mary, to put it simply, was young, poor, pregnant and unmarried. Kelsey says she made haste to go to Elizabeth's house for a three-month visit because she couldn't get out of Nazareth fast enough. People talk. People could see what was happening as young Mary walked back and forth to the well in Nazareth. When the story of the heavenly visitation leaked, the talk turned cruel ... "I'll bet it was a heavenly visitor!" Joseph was embarrassed, heartbroken, angry ... his young fiancée, his betrothed, was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father. And so Mary ran to Elizabeth, her older, wiser, kind and loving relative, who herself was six month's pregnant.

When Elizabeth gave birth, Mary returned to Nazareth and perhaps now the cruel talk and rumors had ceased. It was old news now. But the most extraordinary thing happened. Joseph decided to believe her, trust her, as unlikely and unreal as it all was. He knew better. He knew how women become pregnant. He had already decided to call it off – quietly because he still loved her. But Joseph decided – as Mary had decided months before, to trust and to risk and to follow where this adventure wanted to lead, which turned out to be to Bethlehem, by order of the emperor. Now Mary is not simply pregnant but as the old King James version put it so beautifully, "great with child." It's not an easy trip – one hundred miles walking and riding on a donkey; maybe 20 miles a day, five or six days. It's very dry and rocky and dangerous. And after almost a week, they arrive in Bethlehem.

Her life will be difficult. Her husband will die and she will manage her home and children alone. Her oldest son will decide to follow his sense of God's will, just as she did 30 years earlier, and people will not understand him, will malign and ridicule him. She will watch as he is ejected from the synagogue in Nazareth, their home, and she will follow him for three years and watch as he is arrested, tortured and executed. And she will stay with his followers afterward. She is the only person in history to know Jesus every day of his life. Distinguished New Testament scholar Raymond Brown calls her "the first disciple."

I think we Protestants have missed a lot by not paying more attention to her.

Mary expresses an important truth, namely the kindness and mercy and accessibility of God. She does express the feminine dimension of God in a way the church always meant for the Holy Spirit to convey: a feminine image which over the years, in the hands of male theologians and liturgists and hymn writers has become masculine. So Mary is a reminder.

And in her Magnificat, the song she sings to Elizabeth, Mary adds important content to our celebration of her and her son's birth:

> "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my sprit rejoices in God my savior. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty..."

She is a reminder, in the midst of the sweet gentleness of Christmas, that God has an agenda, and that God's son upsets the conventional, traditional structures in our world and that God expects people who hear and know the truth to work tirelessly for a kingdom in which the hungry are fed and the homeless housed, and the sick comforted, and the oppressed set free and the poor treated with justice. Mary is a needed reminder that the birth of the Christ Child has everything in the world to do with how this society of ours will continue to struggle with the remnants of centuries of racial oppression, which means, to be just as specific as Mary was, whether or not we can sustain the moral will which is expressed in Affirmative Action and a new tax policy to fund public education equally and someday to find a way to make certain that poor American children are not killed every hour, every day, because we cannot and will not generate the moral outrage and political will to eliminate or even reduce the number of guns in the hands of anyone who wants to own and fire one. Mary, with her maternal compassion, would weep at the deaths of the high school children in Paducah, Kentucky, but I am sure she would also be asking about a society that makes accessible to a disturbed adolescent a full arsenal of deadly weapons.

We need Mary's reminder of the fullness of the Gospel.

Mary's life was a response to that incident which occurred in her adolescence when she was visited by an angel.

For Mary, that encounter was first an affirmation, a sense of being loved and valued...

> "He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant," Mary said.

God had chosen her, improbably, unexpectedly, wildly – this young girl, to bear in her body the incarnation of God's love.

Does it happen to you and me? Of course it does...if you understand and recognize it. An angel is someone who tells you that you are loved. An angel reminds you that there is only one of you, that God meant for there to be a you and that no matter how inconspicuous and unimportant or marginal you may seem to yourself, God sees you very differently. It can be your spouse, your lover, your friend, who gives you the gift of knowing you are loved. It can be a colleague, a fellow worker, an associate who, with respect and confidence, lets you know you are valued. It can be and often is a child, who for no earthly reason other than the fact that you are you, shouts and runs to you and holds onto your leg or literally leaps into your waiting arms. An angel tells you that you are God's beloved.

And an angel tells you that there is work to do. It may not be work you particularly want to do – any more than Mary wanted to be pregnant at the age of 14 or 15. It may be inconvenient, difficult, impossible work.

In the bestseller *Cold Mountain*, a wounded Confederate soldier walks out of a hospital and heads home to North Carolina, walking, with few resources other than his courage and utter determination. I've been thinking about his journey and Mary's arduous journey to Bethlehem

and beyond. In one terrible but beautiful incident, he comes upon an 18 year-old young woman with an infant, her husband recently killed in battle, alone in the tiny cabin they have built in the wilderness, with no food other than a few chickens and the hog which will get them through the winter. In a sequence of power and beauty, she takes the wandering veteran in, feeds him what she has, washes his filthy clothes. And then three Union soldiers appear: he hides, they threaten to kill the infant, but instead take the hog which will have the same effect. Inman does what he has to do – it is violent and terrible – but it is what he must do if the child and mother are to live.

An angel tells us we are loved and that God has work for us to do. We may not want to do it. We may not think we are capable of doing it any more than young Mary would have thought herself capable of producing the Messiah. We may, in fact, wish passionately that we could do something else. An angel calls us to duty, responsibility, to tasks God has for us to do – in our professions, in our families, in our intimate relationships, in our life in the world.

Mary trusted the angel. Mary believed that God would make a way where there was no way. Mary answered, "Here am I; let it be with me according to your word."

The story of Christmas which we will retell and rehear and rehearse a hundred times in the next ten days is, at heart, a story of a God who comes quietly into the life of the world, and also, quietly into your life and mine.

It is a beautiful story of love and grace, expressed in symbols which transport us back through time, 2,000 years, to a frightened young girl and to the time of her delivery.

And it is about you. You are loved – by God – eternally. And God has work for you to do.

How to respond? We will respond with gratitude and joy and laughter and song – and I hope – in the midst of it all, quietly, personally, passionately....

"Here am I, Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

* * * * *

We are grateful, O God, for the way this story inspires, lifts us up, encourages us and makes us stronger and better. Help us, as well, to hear and to know the work you have for us to do, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.